

Sports as a passport to success: Life skill integration in a positive youth development program

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Hemphill, M. A., Gordon, B. A. & Wright, P. M. (2019). Sports as a passport to success: Life skill integration in a positive youth development program. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 24(4), 390–401.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy on April 15, 2019, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/17408989.2019.1606901>

Abstract:

Background: Sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs aim to teach life skills to youth within a physical activity context. An explicit objective of most SBYD programs is that youth learn to apply, or transfer, life skills beyond the sports program. Limited research has been conducted on the cognitive processes that help youth understand how life skills apply within and beyond sports.

Purpose: This study uses a conceptual framework on transfer of life skills to examine the role of life skills in an SBYD program. Research questions include: (1) how does the SBYD program integrate the teaching of life skills, (2) how do youth participants experience the life skills in the boxing program, and (3) how do youth participants perceive the life skills impact them beyond the program.

Methodology: This research took place at three community boxing academies in New Zealand. The three academies were selected because they are affiliated with a boxing program that is committed to implementing a life skills framework called the Passport to Success. Forty-one youth (31 boys, 10 girls) across the three sites participated in focus groups interviews about their experience in the program. Additionally, observations of program implementation documented the daily routines of each boxing academy. Using a qualitative case study design, inductive analysis and constant comparative methods were used to identify emergent themes.

Findings: Youth participants perceived life skills to be a foundational component of the boxing program. The life skills were presented to youth through the 'Passport to Success', a document featuring eight key life skills. The coaches focused on the Passport to Success in several ways, including setting an expectation that youth memorize the life skills to demonstrate their commitment. Several youth participants discussed learning valuable lessons around the life

skills. Finally, youth were able to describe scenarios which demonstrated how the life skills connected with other areas of their lives.

Conclusion: Life skills implementation was guided by the Passport to Success and an expectation that youth develop positive relationships in the gym. A routine strategy for memorizing the Passport to Success provided a clear example of youth learning the meaning of life skills in the context of sports. The youth participants demonstrated cognitive connections in their explanation of the value of life skills beyond the boxing program. Using the conceptual framework on transfer [Jacobs and Wright 2018. “Transfer of Life Skills in Sport-Based Youth Development Programs: A Conceptual Framework Bridging Learning to Application.” *Quest* 70 (1): 81–99] helps to explain the cognitive connections youth participants make between life skills in a sports program and their application beyond sports.

Keywords: Positive youth development | transfer | life skills

Article:

Introduction

This paper reports on a New Zealand based program that uses the sport of boxing as a context to teach life skills to youth. The Billy Graham youth development program began at a single boxing academy for boys in 2004. It has since expanded to four academies within New Zealand, two of which have girls’ classes. This article is based on an evaluation of three academies, two (Tahi and Rua) are based in the North Island, while the third Toru (pseudonyms) is situated in the South Island of New Zealand. The development of the program was organic, evolving through a grassroots approach driven by boxing coach Billy Graham, a New Zealand boxing champion. While centered around the sport of boxing, the program places a strong emphasis on the teaching of eight life skills, which are presented to youth participants as the ‘Passport to Success.’ The purpose of this study was to examine how a grassroots community youth sports program integrates life skills into its programs and the perceived impact of the life skills on youth participants.

Positive youth development (PYD) is an approach to youth work grounded in a belief that all youth have strengths and skills that can be cultivated when aligned with appropriate resources. It is considered that PYD occurs most effectively when youth have positive relationships with peers, adults, and the institutions in their lives (Lerner 2017). PYD programs view youth as unique individuals and acknowledge that developmental challenges impact youth in different ways. However, PYD programs avoid framing developmental issues as problems to overcome (Damon 2004) instead focusing on the potential of youth, including youth who are defined by society as at-risk or disadvantaged (Lerner and Benson 2003). PYD identifies a series of developmental assets including (1) physical development, (2) intellectual development, (3)

emotional development, and (4) social development. (Hamilton, Hamilton, and Pittman 2004). These developmental assets are often conceptualized by PYD programs as life skills that can be applied in multiple contexts beyond a PYD program (Hellison 2011; Holt 2016).

Sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs intentionally use sport and physical activity contexts as the means for achieving PYD outcomes. They provide youth with structured sport and physical activity experiences that explicitly prioritize the development of personal and social life skills, along with the physical development more commonly associated with sport participation (Gordon, Jacobs, and Wright, 2016). In this context, life skills are broadly defined as personal assets that enable youth to survive and thrive in different areas of their lives (Danish, Forneris, and Wallace 2005). Previous research suggests that when life skills are developed through implicit or explicit practices within sports, there is potential for youth to transfer those life skills to other contexts (Bean et al. 2018).

Best practices for life skill development in SBYD programs include a focus on developing positive relationships, an explicit focus on the teaching and learning of life skills, the transfer of these skills into other areas of participants lives, and integrating life skill instruction throughout sports programs (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin 2005). When a positive climate and a focus on life skills are present, SBYD outcomes are enhanced and transfer of life skills to other areas is more likely (Holt et al. 2017). Many programs developed with the intent to focus on life skills (e.g. Martinek, Schilling, and Hellison 2006; Weiss et al. 2013) take advantage of previous knowledge of PYD frameworks. Others, however, are developed from a grassroots approach of providing sport opportunities to youth. Such programs may focus on life skills, to the extent that they align with their mission and meet the needs of youth in their communities. In many cases, this is an organic process based on perceptions of what works and what doesn't, rather than from extant theoretical knowledge. How life skills are taught and integrated into SBYD programs that have developed without specific knowledge of PYD is an area that requires further research. The findings of such research would inform SBYD scholars and practitioners on ways that sport can more effectively enhance PYD.

Conceptual framework

Research on SBYD programs has demonstrated that participation can result in the development of life skills (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin 2005), and some studies suggest that the transfer of this learning to other areas of participants' lives is an outcome of high quality SBYD programs (Walsh, Ozaeta, and Wright 2010; Allen, Rhind, and Koshy 2015). Several qualitative case studies provide evidence that youth participants, parents, and teachers perceive a positive impact of SBYD programs in other areas of participants lives such as school (Hellison and Walsh 2002; Hemphill and Richards 2016). These studies have largely relied on self-report measures to give voice to participants and stakeholders to better understand their perceptions of transfer and to help clarify contextual factors that inhibit or enable transfer to occur (Lee and Martinek 2013). A definitive understanding of transfer remains elusive due, in part, to a limited

understanding of the processes that facilitate youth learning life skills in one context and applying those skills in a different context.

The question of whether transfer occurs, and if so, what processes facilitate transfer remains a hot topic in scholarly conversation. A recently published conceptual framework for transfer (Jacobs and Wright 2018) focuses on the cognitive processes that help to bridge the gap between the learning of life skills and the application of those skills within and beyond sports. The authors argue that consideration must be given to these cognitive processes if transfer of learning is to be fully understood. Jacobs and Wright's (2018) framework addresses several shortcomings around transfer that have been identified in the literature. Previous research suggests that youth are not always fully aware of the life skills being taught in their programs (Danish, Forneris, and Wallace 2005) or that the life skills are applicable outside of the program (Petitpas et al. 2005). To address this limitation, Jacobs and Wright (2018) draw upon transformative experiences (Pugh et al. 2010) as a framework to explain how youth can apply learning to situations outside the SBYD program itself.

The Jacobs and Wright (2018) conceptual model for skill transfer in SBYD includes four components: (1) program implementation, (2) student learning, (3) cognitive connections, and (4) application. The transfer process begins with program implementation, including the integration of life skills into activities. Quality program implementation provides the foundation upon which life skills can be learned through sport participation. Second, youth learn more about the life skills introduced through sport. This increased level of awareness may allow youth to understand the complexities of life skills as they occur within the context of sport. Third, the transfer process develops as youth make cognitive connections. In other words, as youth see the value of life skills in the sport context their perception of the utility of like skills within and beyond sports may expand. The cognitive process also considers the motivation of youth to use, or transfer, life skills. Finally, the application of life skills beyond sports includes behavior changes, informed decision making, or changes in worldview. The application of life skills is considered more broadly than previous research and is not limited to observable behavior change. The model acknowledges that a variety of contextual factors (i.e. student, teacher, and environment) influence program activities and outcomes.

When considering programs through the conceptual model of life skill transfer, it is important to first consider the learning that takes place within a youth development program, i.e. before considering how life skills are transferred beyond the program (Jacobs and Wright 2018). The question of life skill learning and transfer often begins at the end, examining how transfer has occurred without first establishing the teaching and learning of life skills within the contexts of a youth program. Therefore, research that documents the implementation of life skills in the program, the processes and procedures that occur in practice, along with the youth perspectives, can help advance research related to transfer of learning and SBYD. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of life skills in an SBYD program through the lens of the conceptual model for life skill transfer. The following research questions were used to guide the data collection: (1) how does the SBYD program integrate the teaching of life skills, (2) how do

youth participants experience the life skills in the boxing program, and (3) how do youth participants perceive the life skills impact them beyond the program.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative case study approach (Yin 2002) because it allowed the researchers to examine youth perceptions of the learning of life skills within the real-world context of one community-based SBYD model. Ethical approval to complete this study was obtained from a university human ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants in the study. Parental consent was obtained from the parents of youth under 16 years of age as well as the assent of youth. Billy Graham gave consent for his name and the name of his youth foundation to be used in publications. However, pseudonyms are used for all other participants and the location of the three boxing gyms.

Program description

The Billy Graham Youth Foundation (BGYF) is a non-profit organization that aims to empower youth to reach their full potential through community boxing programs (Graham and Gifford 2012). The program was founded by Billy Graham, a retired New Zealand boxing champion. For several years, Coach Graham administered the community boxing program at a gymnasium adjacent to his home and within the community that is served by the program. Since opening in 2006, with an initial focus on serving boys, the program has recently added a separate class for girls. Some youth participants join the gym through open gym days, while others are referred by their school or other community partners such as the police. All participants have the choice of whether to join or not to join a gym. Each academy runs three levels of classes, with 30 participants in all classes. All classes run twice a week. The fundamental (9–10 years) for 60 min, juniors (11–13 years) for 90 min while the seniors (14–18 years) run two hour sessions. While a number of the youth start at the fundamental stage and move through to seniors, others join at the junior or sometimes the senior level. All three head coaches are either current or former New Zealand boxers. There are a number of other coaches with varying degrees of boxing experience. In the Tahi academy, for example, two former New Zealand boxing champions attend regularly while two younger coaches have limited boxing experience but are have training in education and youth development. Each academy has a head coach with the other coaches sharing the coaching roles as a team.

The boxing related activities include skill practice (e.g. shadow boxing and punching heavy bags) and conditioning drills presented in a standard format. Sparring is also included in the program, this is optional for participants and those who wish to spar are only allowed to do so when the coaches consider they have reached a sufficient level of skill and experience. In addition to the boxing activities, the class gathers together to sit as a group at the start and at the end of each session. The initial gathering is a time to focus on the coming session, to discuss

what had been happening since the last session and to reinforce the underpinning life skills. For example, the authors observed youth discussing their progress at school and youth citing the Passport to Success as playing a role on their life beyond the boxing gym. The concluding gathering is an opportunity for participants to recite their life skills and to talk about the session. It always finishes with the handing out of food bars and fruit.

While the program is strongly focused on boxing it also has a clear and explicit focus on eight life skills presented in the 'Passport to Success.' It describes each of the eight life skills at length. For example, the definition for 'Respect' is 'willingness to treat with courtesy; to hold in high regard, to honor, to care about yourself.' Each definition is supported by several examples of the life skill in action:

Treat everyone you meet as if they were the most important person in the world; Make the most of yourself for that is all there is of you; Respectful behaviour is the oil that keeps a class working well; If you want to be respected, you must respect yourself; Treat others the way you would want to be treated; Respect the right to be listened to, learn and be safe in our classroom.

The remaining seven life skills are responsibility, compassion, consideration, kindness, duty, obedience, and honesty. The Passport to Success is provided to all youth participants in a pamphlet format and the life skills are prominently displayed on the walls of the gym. The authors observed youth and program leaders refer to 'life skills' and 'values' interchangeably. For the purpose of this paper, we use the term 'life skills' because they refer to specific examples of skills that youth can practice and are consistent with other research on SBYD programs (Holt et al. 2017).

Program setting

At the time of this study, the BGYF operated boxing academies in three locations in New Zealand. All three use the Passport to Success as its life skill curriculum. Billy Graham is still active in administrating and coaching at the Tahī Academy while the Rua and Toru academies have attempted to replicate the practices established at the Tahī academy with separate coaches and administrative staff. All the boxing academies have a central location in the communities they serve. Youth participants can apply to join the academies because of their personal interest, including those who are recommended to join by school officials or community police officers. These recommendations are based on their need for structured out-of-school programming. There is a long waiting list at all three academies. The BGYF has established strong relationships with the New Zealand police and the community police officers. Most notably, one police officer was assigned to work full time with the BGYF for 18 months. During that time, the officer led a variety of initiatives including inviting other officers to visit boxing academies, coordinating the

enrollment of youth who may benefit from the academies, and developing critical program infrastructure such as a code of conduct.

Participants and focus group interviews

Youth participants (N = 41) engaged in semi-structured focus group interviews about their experience in the program. An effort was made to have a representative sample across the three program sites. At the Tahi Academy, 14 boys participated in two focus groups (8 senior; 6 junior). At Rua 12 boys (4 senior; 4 junior; 4 fundamental) and 10 girls (5 junior; 5 fundamental) participated while at the Toru academy five senior boys were interviewed. The participants represented the greater makeup of the program at each gym. Boys were the majority of the sample pool because girls were only recently added to the program. All focus group interviews followed a semi-structured approach where the interviewer asked a lead question and used follow-up questioning to probe the responses. Example questions included ‘what are the most important things you learn at BGYF?, Do you apply any lessons learned in the gym at home or at school?, and what would you say about the program to a friend who was considering joining’?

Field notes

The second author observed over 50 classes in total. Field notes were recorded during these observations. One area of focus was the documenting of the integration of life skills. For example, it was noted when youth participants reflected on life skills at the end of practice or were recognized by coaches for positive behaviors. The field notes also helped the researchers understand the extent to which life skills were featured in the program alongside the boxing practice.

Data analysis

Inductive analysis and constant comparative methods were used to examine data from focus group interviews and field notes (Strauss and Corbin 2015). A qualitative codebook was developed by the first author and reviewed by the research team. The codes included operational definitions of themes that were applied across all the focus group data (Richards and Hemphill 2018). Several methodological strategies were employed to promote the trustworthiness of findings. First, the second author spent extensive amounts of time in the SBYD setting before, during, and after the completion of this study. This prolonged engagement helped to gain the trust of participants. The first and third author also visited two of the boxing gyms on multiple occasions. Second, audit trails of the data were maintained in order to document the research process through a qualitative data management system. Third, peer debriefings were held among the authors routinely throughout the research process (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Finally, the research team used a proactive approach to address cultural issues. A research advisor, who was of Samoan/New Zealand ethnicity, helped ensure the data collection, analysis, and reporting were sensitive to cultural issues that often emerge in research involving minority populations

(Wright et al. 2018). The cultural advisor ensured that the research was consistent with the cultural values of participants who are from ethnic minority groups in New Zealand. For example, he conducted focus group interviews where there were predominately Pasifika participants.

Results

The results section is organized around three themes: life skill integration, positive relationships, and transfer of life skills. The gender of the participant, and the boxing academy they were a member of, is listed alongside each quote.

Life skill integration

The teaching and learning around the Passport to Success, and the life skills it described, occurred in several ways. The eight life skills were prominently displayed on the walls of the boxing gym and referenced during the boxing sessions. All participants, and their families, received copies of the Passport to Success document when they first enrolled in the academy. It was explained that the Passport to Success was the underpinning framework for the academy and that the coaches believed that the life skills contained in it were the most important things that they would learn from attending. The participants were encouraged to memorize the life skills, descriptions, and examples so they could confidently recite them in front of others.

During the final few minutes of each session the participants joined together in a circle where they could ‘talk about anything.’ During this time, they were given an opportunity to recite a life skill of their choice. This was enthusiastically supported by the group with vocal encouragement of those attempting to recite life skills and group celebrations when they were successful. Any participant who could recite one of the life skills in its totality, received a magnet acknowledging the achievement which they then attached to their lockers. When a participant could recite all eight life skills successfully, they were awarded a life membership of the academy.

During the circle time the coaches also discussed life skills in relation to participants’ lives. For example, one day the researcher observed that ‘that they spent 10 min discussing the Passport to Success ... for the first-time kindness was the value, and [the coach] was attempting to relate it to the kids’ lives outside of the gym.’ It was notable, however, that the integration of life skills was not observed in the physical activity part of the lesson and there were few examples of the coaches discussing actions and behaviors shown in the boxing sessions with direct reference to the life skills.

All youth participants reported that they had learnt at least one of the eight life skills. Field notes reported several examples of students reciting the life skills to their class and of classes being encouraged to learn them by coaches. Some reported that they had memorized all eight life skills and received a life membership to the boxing academy. While the participants

reported being motivated to memorize the life skills they acknowledged this could be challenging, 'I can like remember them one night but forget the next day.'

Positive relationships as a foundation for life skill development

The results confirmed that youth participants perceived life skills to be a foundational component of the boxing program. One participant, indicative of many, commented that 'boxing is kind of like the last thing we do, it's so much more other stuff than boxing' (Rua boy). Some youth saw their learning of life skills as connected to their peers, 'I've made lots of new friends and it's all about our values ... it's really cool to be with all these girls who help me learn that' (Rua girl). According to the youth participants, boxing was a 'fun' and 'challenging' activity that helped them learn 'how to build yourself up as a person in general ... as a better and healthier person and to get you confident at school, at home, and in the community' (Toru boy). The youth participants seemed to develop these impressions based on intentional program practices that helped youth feel as if the gym was a 'safe place to release feelings' (Rua boy).

One important underlying belief was that in order to successfully facilitate the learning of life skills, it was imperative that the youth established positive and respectful relationships with each other and with their coaches. 'I'd even got to [coach] before I talk to my parents, because I trust him so much,' one Rua boy explained. The researchers observed consistent efforts to build these relationships. There was a strong expectation that students would get to know each other well. Field notes described that when the groups gathered 'everyone went around and shook hands and introduced them self' and 'that this is a safe place was emphasized to the group.' Youth participants were expected to learn everyone's name and on occasions when they had forgotten they had conversations to help them learn more about each other. Coach Graham often explained to the students that, 'you all have 30 friends in this room and you need to look after them.'

Focus group interviews revealed that these positive relationships made students feel as if the gym was a 'safe haven' that it 'makes everyone feel so welcome and comfortable.' Boys and girls referred to the boxing gym as a 'brotherhood' or 'sisterhood.' One girl explained that, 'I've made lots of new friends and it's all about our values, it's so cool to be with all these girls who help me learn and all that, I have so much fun' (Rua girls). According to youth participants, the positive atmosphere was grounded in their appreciation for the respect shown by their coaches. 'Billy respects us,' explained one senior level participant, 'this whole gym is a family.' At Toru, youth participants offered an example of how one coach goes beyond expectations:

Murray he's just the man aye ... Like he had a really awesome car with like butterfly doors and stuff, and he's like 'wait some boys can't get themselves to boxing, even though they really want to so, I'll go get a van so ... he sold his car ... now we can go pick up all the boys.

Across all three gyms, students cited positive relationships with coaches. For example, several students described Ally as someone they would trust to discuss personal issues with. 'If I had a problem, I'd go to Ally about it because she is not a biased type of person and you can talk to her about anything,' explained one of the junior girls. Another explained that, 'If I was feeling uncomfortable about anything I would go to Ally.' Some youth were surprised by the caring relationships of adults,

Yeah I don't really think adults cared about what I did as a kid, but whenever I come here they are always talking about what I have done in sport or in the weekend or when I was away. So just real friendly as if they are our parents. (Tahi boy)

Transfer of life skills

Several youth participants discussed learning valuable lessons they had learnt that applied beyond the boxing gym. For example, one boy (Toru) described that in the past 'if people called me names I would punch them and now [coach] has taught me how to control that.' One senior boy (Tahi) explained that he previously had 'a bad temper' but 'I came here and you know my tempers got a bit better and my people skills are better.' Other students explained that they are learning to put in a good effort, 'we try our best and we know it's okay to have a bad day as long as we try our best.' Youth participants also recognized that life skills are relevant to different contexts. For example, when asked which skills were more important the youth explained that 'no one [life skill] is better than the other because they all tell different messages.' Another participant elaborated to explain that 'maybe in one situation respect or responsibility would be more important than honesty and truthfulness, they each have their own strengths.'

The interviews revealed examples of students using a cognitive bridging process to connect life skills with other areas of their lives. For example, one student (junior boy) described that he realized how honesty and truthfulness was applicable to school:

I used to lie a lot to teachers and stuff so I didn't have to get into trouble. But now that I've learned Honesty and Truthfulness, there's one thing on the [Passport to Success] that's 100% true, it's that if you tell the truth you don't have to remember what you said. If you lie, and you say something the next day you'll probably say another thing so you've got to like keep on remembering your lies.

Several other students made comments suggesting that 'my teacher noticed a big difference in my behavior in the class' after they joined the boxing gym. One student described that 'sometimes behind my teacher's back I would be silly, but then I started to learn to be respectful to her, to be compassionate.' She explained that she changed her behavior out of compassion because 'it can take all [of a teacher's] lunch time to solve a problem.' One girl (Rua) explained that 'I try to teach them to other people at my school because there are some people who are

really disrespectful and I try to teach them to be more respectful.’ Another commented that she also tries to show others how to respect people at school, but ‘it is quite difficult for some people.’

One senior boy (Rua) explained that the value of respect was different from his home environment. ‘I don’t get given a lot of respect,’ he explained, ‘so there’s really no point in giving respect if they are not going to be bothered to respect me.’ However, another youth explained about using the life skills to impact on family,

With respect, I use it against my sister. If she is not respecting me I just bring up the fact that we respect each other at the gym and when it comes to home time it changes sometimes, so I just use it and I just keep reminding her that it is important to live these values, including to your sisters (CC Junior girls).

Another girl agreed with this sentiment and added, ‘I just don’t listen to my own opinion and forget about other people’s [opinion]. I now realize that you have to get everyone’s opinion to get the best of what you are doing.’ Finally, one boy recalled an anecdote of the life skills impact his decisions in the community,

this lady was putting shopping into a car and she was struggling and so then I went over and helped her, and then after doing that it kind of made me feel better. But if I haven’t gone to this gym ... I probably would have just let her do her thing and go home but coming to the gym made me realize what the values mean a lot more, instead of just words but then realizing what they are.

Discussion

This study examined a SBYD boxing program that explicitly incorporated the teaching and learning of life skills as an integral part of the experience. The study sought to identify (1) how the SBYD program integrated the teaching and learning of life skills, (2) how youth participants experience the life skills in the boxing program, and (3) how the youth participants perceived the life skills to impact them beyond the program. The major sources of data were the voices of the youth participants and observational field notes. The findings were considered through the lens of the theoretical conceptual framework on transfer of life skills (Jacobs and Wright 2018).

Prior research on SBYD programs has suggested that using intentional strategies for the teaching of life skills, and integrating the learning of them into the physical activity component of the program, are two practices likely to increase the effectiveness of the learning (Hellison 2011; Martinek and Lee 2012). In this study, the Passport to Success were identified as being the central framework for the learning of life skills. Observations of the program documented the intentional practices that were employed by coaches. These included setting an expectation that students memorize the eight life skills and the supporting examples used to describe them in

practice. The eight life skills were also prominently displayed within the gyms, which was a visual reminder of their importance, and at the conclusion of most sessions there was discussion among the group around some aspect of the Passport to Success. The ready availability of copies of the Passport to Success within the gyms, and the regular handing of copies to parents, caregivers and visitors, all reinforced its importance. While a number of intentional teaching practices were observed, there was little evidence of life skills being integrated into the boxing-related physical activities.

Central to all SBYD programs is the expectation that life skills learnt in the program will be applied by participants to other aspects of their lives. This transfer of learning is essentially the justification given for SBYD programs and the degree to which it occurs is an important measure of program success. Previous research on transfer of life skills has generally emphasized outcomes through self-reports of transfer experiences by youth and other stakeholders (Gordon 2010; Walsh, Ozaeta, and Wright 2010). While there is a great deal to be learnt from outcome based research, there are also limitations to this approach. It has been suggested that, as an alternative, researchers should examine what happens within the program, with the intention of better identifying the relationship between the actual experiences of participants and the observed outcomes (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Coalter 2012). This study was designed to identify the procedures and processes that occurred within the BGYF programs and their relationship to the learning and transfer of life skills. The youth participants reported that they had developed an understanding of the life skills presented in the Passport to Success and were aware of ways in which they might be applied outside of the boxing gym. Many of them gave specific examples of the life skills having a tangible and positive impact on their lives outside the gym.

When these examples of transfer are considered through the lens of the transfer framework, it is reasonable to conclude that some of the youth participants had developed cognitive connections between what was happening in the gym and their outside lives. In terms of the processes occurring within the program, all four components of the transfer process were observed (i.e. program implementation, student learning, cognitive connections and application). For example, one quote illustrated this when a young boy reflected on his decision to help a someone as she struggled to load groceries into her car. The boy reflected that the SBYD program ‘made me realize what the values mean a lot more’ and explained how this helped him understand the value of helping a community member in need. Although this finding was not observed among all participants, this study adds to the knowledge base of transfer of learning by using the cognitive bridging process as a lens to observe the process by which youth begin to understand how life skills apply within and beyond the sport context (Jacobs and Wright 2018).

As detailed previously, many writers have commented on the need to integrate the learning of life skills with the physical activity inherent in SBYD programs. The success of this program, despite the lack of a specific integration of the teaching of life skills and activity, suggest that the need for integration may not be as clear cut as some writers believe. The findings suggest that integrating life skills into conversations at the beginning and end of practice on a

routine basis can yield some positive outcomes. In this study, such efforts helped youth participants memorize a common set of life skills and describe ways they are applicable beyond the gym. There was little evidence to suggest that youth made cognitive connections between the life skills and their boxing experience. Therefore, the memorization may be viewed as a success of the program. However, SBYD programs that integrate life skills with the physical activity may better enhance youth development outcomes (Bean and Forneris 2016).

Ward and Parker (2013) argue that SBYD programs should consider aligning their atmosphere with instructional practices to maximize youth development. While the pedagogical approaches used within the BGYF programs are important, the program culture and the quality of relationships within it have also been identified as important elements in the teaching and learning of life skills (Armour, Sandford, and Duncombe 2013; Jacobs, Knoppers, and Webb 2013; Walsh, Veri, and Willard 2015). The consistent focus on life skills seems to have enhanced the interest of the youth participants. This may have been in part, because of the positive motivational climate established by coaches and embraced by the participants. Relationships were important and the youth were expected to learn about and respect one another. The positive and respectful relationships between the youth and their coaches was both consistent and notable.

This study draws on the voices of the youth and as such provides new insights into the youth participant's perception on the learning of life skills and transferring them to other environments (Ward and Parker 2013). Their perspective helps understand how youth might be better supported to successfully transfer learning to other contexts. The participants in this study, for example, often described examples of transfer (Gordon and Doyle 2015), to environments where the life skills were applicable (i.e. home, school), rather than give examples of far transfer. This suggests that youth participants may therefore require more specific support to help transfer life skills in more abstract ways. Coaches should perhaps do more to promote transfer by identifying authentic opportunities for youth to use their life skills outside of sports (Holton and Baldwin 2013) and consider practices that help youth think through their life skill utilization within the gym in addition to their focus on behavioral outcomes beyond sports (Jacobs and Wright 2018).

Conclusion and future research

Results from this study suggest that an intentional focus on well-defined life skills within a SBYD program can promote a foundational understanding of life skills among youth. The memorization strategy, and emphasis on the Passport to Success, provided youth with a common language related to life skills and facilitated a desire to learn and apply them to their lives. The voice of youth participants helps describe the ways in which youth interpreted the application of life skills beyond the gym. One important contribution of this research is to provide an example of the cognitive connections youth see between life skills in a SBYD program and external settings such as school and home.

Another interesting finding was that youth learned about life skills without the integration of them into the boxing activities. The integration of life skills with physical activity is a best practice for SBYD programs (Hellison 2011). The degree to which learning of life skills could be increased, if at all, by the integration of life skills with physical activity is uncertain. Future research should consider how life skill integration can enhance learning outcomes. This study found youth learned to memorize a definition of life skills which served as a foundation for them to make cognitive connections on how life skills apply beyond the gym. While this was a valuable outcome, many SBYD programs aim to help youth become self-directed in their application of life skills (Hellison 2011). Future research and practice in this area can consider the value of using similar learning strategies to ensure that youth participants and program leaders have a common understanding of program goals. Additionally, future research can consider the skills and support that coaches need to help youth transfer life skills beyond sports.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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